

When Gov. Dewitt Clinton broke ground on the Erie Canal in 1817, the project was derided as "Clinton's Big Ditch". One of our greatest presidents, Thomas Jefferson, referred to it as "a little short of madness."

In hindsight, we know that, far from madness, it was genius. It created millions of American jobs and economic opportunities, and it laid the groundwork for more than a century of prosperity in upstate New York. It was revolutionary.

In 2011, we find ourselves facing similar challenges: inadequate infrastructure, a tough economy and unemployed Americans. This time, New York's path to a renewed economy is high-speed rail.

Recently, I've heard short-sighted calls from some New York colleagues to abandon high-speed rail. Make no mistake — this would also mean abandoning thousands of new jobs and economic opportunities. In fact, the U.S. Conference of Mayors estimates 21,000 new jobs and \$1.1 billion in new wages in New York as a result of high-speed rail.

These same detractors have grumbled that establishing a high-speed rail line would disrupt CSX and freight traffic. This contradicts basic common sense. Instead, a high-speed rail track would free up existing CSX rail lines to operate unimpeded by passenger trains.

Building this dedicated high-speed rail track will create one of the largest economic development corridors in the world, connecting Albany to Montreal, and Toronto back down to Niagara Falls. It would connect upstate New York to New York City and Boston.

Existing "Buy America" provisions for high-speed rail also would guarantee new jobs right here in New York. It would bring new business to the 96 manufacturers and service providers for the passenger rail industry. Eighteen call Syracuse home and several more exist in Fort Drum, Cazenovia, Elmira and Hornell.

As my Chamber of Commerce friends know, we need a mobile, dynamic workforce from which to draw to compete in the 21st-century economy. High-speed rail will help us achieve this.

And it's not just a more robust economy at stake. It's our national security, as well.

Recent events in the Middle East remind us of how closely tied we are to dictators in that oil-rich region. Not only would a high-speed rail network help wean our economy off foreign oil, it would serve as a modern network to move both civilian and military personnel in the case of a national emergency while freeing our freight rail lines to move supplies.

To my fellow members of Congress who say we cannot afford high-speed rail, I ask: Have you said anything about the cost of war in Afghanistan? We spend \$8 billion a month killing and maiming Americans. While our own nation's infrastructure crumbles, we rebuild faraway countries. Why would we spend billions abroad and tell America to do without?

Let's get back to thinking big. I remind New Yorkers of "Clinton's Big Ditch" and ask: Which side of history are you on?